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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Good morning.

Welcome back, David.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you. I would like to thank everybody for their responses, the cards and the flowers. It was much appreciated.

The Chair: We missed you.

Good morning, and welcome to the 102nd meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. This meeting is in public.

We have some guests. We have the petitions committee from the Moroccan government, and the head of the delegation, Ms. Halima. Welcome very much. It's great. We would never have expected a petitions committee from Morocco to be here today as we discuss petitions. It's very exciting. We don't have a petitions committee ourselves. That's very interesting.

Before we resume our consideration of the email system, we'll proceed to the election of the second vice-chair. I'll turn it over to the clerk to run the election.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Lauzon): Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the second vice-chair must be a member of an opposition party other than the official opposition. I'm now prepared to take motions for second vice-chair.

Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): I nominate Mr. Christopherson.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Mr. Nater that Mr. Christopherson be elected as second vice-chair of the committee.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): It is.

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. David Christopherson duly elected as second vice-chair.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

The Chair: Congratulations. That was a hard-fought campaign.

With respect to the committee's review of the e-petitions system of the House of Commons, members will recall that we first met on this subject on November 7. At the time, we asked the Clerk to provide us with a list of issues to consider, which members received on April 10.

You have two documents: one is on those potential options from the House, and the other is suggested recommendations from Project Naval Distinction. To assist us, it's great to have Charles Robert, Clerk of the House; and André Gagnon, Deputy Clerk, Procedure. I know you are very busy. Thank you for being here.

The provisional Standing Orders governing e-petitions that came into effect at the beginning of this Parliament remain provisional until such time as the report from this committee is concurred in by the House. Hopefully, we can do that report today

Monsieur Robert, it would be great to have some comments from you to open our discussion.

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the invitation to again address the committee in its review of the House of Commons e-petition system. As you can see, and as you mentioned, I am accompanied by André Gagnon, the Deputy Clerk of Procedure. He and I, mostly he, are prepared to answer questions following the presentation.

At my last appearance, members raised a number of issues about e-petitions, as well as paper petitions, and the ways to enhance processes for both. The committee asked me to highlight aspects of current systems that could be considered as part of its review.

We have compiled a list of these in the document that has been shared with the committee. They are based on concerns raised by members and by the public over the past two years. Please note that these are not meant to be an exhaustive list of options. Members may wish to raise other issues or proposals, which the administration of course would be responsive to. For example, there may be a desire to have the rules for electronic and paper petitions more closely mirror each other.

However, for the purposes of today's presentation, I wish to focus on four areas where enhancements were identified in the case of e-petitions, and two areas identified for paper petitions.

● (1110)

[*Translation*]

The first issue with e-petitions has to do with the timeline for signatures. Standing Order 36(2.2) provides that each e-petition is open for signature for 120 days. This can impede the use of an e-petition to raise time-sensitive matters quickly.

To address this, the committee could agree to shorten the deadline to 60 or 90 days or to provide greater flexibility to petitioners in selecting a deadline. For example, they could be asked to choose from several options with the possibility of extending the chosen deadline if needed. Alternatively, petitioners could be given the option of closing the e-petition to signatures once the threshold has been reached. In all cases I have mentioned, Standing Order 36 would need to be modified.

The second issue has to do with the number of signatures required. Again, Standing Order 36 states that an e-petition must have 500 signatures to be certified; for paper petitions, it is 25 signatures. To date, approximately 70% of published e-petitions meet this 500-signature requirement.

The committee may wish to maintain the 500-signature minimum or consider adjusting the threshold to allow the certification of more petitions. Some lower number could be selected all the way down to 25 that would match the minimum for paper petitions. Any adjustment would require a change to Standing Order 36.

[*English*]

The third issue has to do with the requirement that an e-petition be supported by five individuals. This stipulation was instituted as a filter to limit frivolous or offensive petitions. The obligation to have five supporters has led to some other problems. These include mistakes in the email addresses, or one of the potential supporters not responding in a timely way.

In cases where a petition includes the names of only five potential supporters out of a possible 10, some e-petitions have been unable to proceed further when one individual did not respond, or was later found to be ineligible. Should the supporter requirement be retained, there are certainly technical improvements that could be made to the system to provide users greater flexibility and to avoid some of the issues described.

However, in light of the additional burden this places on petitioners, as well as the role that members themselves play in the process, the committee could decide that the requirement for support from five individuals is an unnecessary step, and instead allow e-petitions to be submitted directly to members. This would not require a change to the Standing Orders.

The last issue dealing with e-petitions is the use of the term "sponsor" in relation to members. It was suggested that the term may be misleading and could be perceived as support for the petition. The role of members in the process could be made clearer by changing the term "sponsor" to something more neutral, like "presenter". This new term would reflect the fact that members are simply agreeing to allow the petition to proceed and are willing to present it to the House if, and when, it is certified.

[*Translation*]

In the report that led to the creation of the e-petitions system, the committee expressed a desire that both paper and electronic petitions, along with the government's responses, be available electronically. Given the volume of paper petitions, this was not possible in the initial phase of the project. We believe that paper and electronic petitions, as well as the government's responses, could be available electronically in the near future.

It is important to stress that in order to implement this next phase, the House administration would continue to work in close collaboration with the Privy Council Office, which is responsible for coordinating the government's response to petitions.

Preliminary discussions with PCO have revealed a number of issues. First, given the resources and effort that would be needed to support two different formats of petitions, allowing responses to be tabled only in an electronic format would allow for a more efficient process. The responses would be available to members more quickly and shared more easily. It would also have a positive environmental impact, considering the paper generated by the hundreds of responses presented each year.

● (1115)

[*English*]

This change in practice would also be a useful pilot project toward greater use of electronic tabling and dissemination of sessional papers, including answers to written questions. In light of this, if members wish to move in this direction, further negotiations would be required with the Privy Council Office to develop a system that would allow for the secure electronic tabling of fully accessible documents.

Last, in terms of paper petitions, there continue to be some rules and practices that some regard as unduly restrictive. For example, there are rules about images and logos, address formats, and the size of paper used. If the committee wishes to allow for more paper petitions to be certified and presented to the House, it could agree to simplify some of these rules.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for this opportunity to speak to you about this subject, and André and I would now be prepared to respond to any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

How I would propose we proceed is to go through on an open format, going through each of these recommendations to see what the committee's thoughts are on the practicality of what we're recommending. It's good that we have the witnesses here.

Is that procedure okay with people?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, let's go to the document you've all received. The first one is related to the days that a petition is potentially open.

Does someone want to open the discussion?

Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): I don't know the way to go about this, but on 120 days, I understand your point about it, that it's untimely. Couldn't the sponsoring or representing MP or whoever is creating it specify how long it is? If they don't make the signature threshold, it's not qualified in any case. So if they say "30 days", then so be it. Is that feasible?

Mr. André Gagnon (Deputy Clerk, Procedure): It's really up to the members of the committee to determine how that number of days could be determined or identified. Among those things, it would be for the member to identify the number of days that would be required, or for the petitioner to determine how many days could be useful.

At the same time, there could be other possibilities. Let's say a petitioner identifies 30 days and there are 445 signatures after 30 days. Could there be a possibility of getting an extension, for instance, to 60 days, or things like that? These are a part of the possibilities that exist.

There is importance to having a deadline, however, and it really has to do with the personal information gathered. The fact is that when you have a deadline, the petition will be closed at that point, and eventually all of the information related to it will be disposed of. That's the important part of having a deadline for petitions.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay, so you could say that if you have achieved your 500 signatures within 30 days it can be closed. The moment it achieves its 500 signatures under 120 days, by 30 days it could be closed, and at 120 days, if you're not there, then it's disqualified.

Mr. André Gagnon: Exactly.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is everybody okay with that, or do you have other ideas?

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): I'm not certain I understand exactly what you're suggesting. You're saying that it closes when it reaches the threshold?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If somebody makes it in less than 120 days, as a choice, when you get to your 30 days and you have 500 signatures, then you can close it. Or when it gets to 500 signatures, it's closed after 30 days, if it's punctual and they want it to be timely. Otherwise it's left at the standard 120 days.

I'm just throwing that idea out.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm still not certain or clear about it. I have no trouble with someone's having the ability to choose their deadline, but there needs to be a deadline, because I think people build campaigns around these things. To say that when it reaches a certain threshold of signatures, no matter what the deadline is...that wouldn't be something I would see as desirable or acceptable. I think people build campaigns around these things, so if it's unpredictable and they don't know when it will end, I think that's not an advisable thing. If we're going to allow people to make a choice, whether it be 120 days or some other number, or we could set a multiple choice—

● (1120)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: And then they could sign it.

Mr. Blake Richards: —of 90 days, 60 days, 120 days or whatever, and maybe there are three different options, but there still needs to be a deadline that everyone knows so they can build their campaigns around it and stuff like that.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Yes.

The Chair: So you're recommending number two, basically?

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm not suggesting that we need to do that. I don't see any issue with what we've been doing, but if we're going to make a change, it certainly still has to be built around a deadline. I'm just saying that if there is going to be a change, then I would oppose the idea of not having deadlines.

I don't see an issue with what we have now, but I would be comfortable and okay with people having an option of choosing other deadlines as long as the deadline is known by everyone up front.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: We could have two choices: 30 days if it's urgent and 120 days for everything else, and be done with it. If you want to make it 30 days, that is your choice and that is the end of it.

I'd be fine with that if you are.

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, as long as everyone knows the deadline and people.... You're right, if you chose 30 days, and that was a bad choice in the end, well—

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That was their choice.

Mr. Blake Richards: That was their choice, yes.

The Chair: The clerk also suggested the possibility of extending that deadline if a signature threshold isn't reached. You're not in favour of that?

Mr. Blake Richards: No, I think there need to be deadlines. That's the key.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'm with Blake on that.

The Chair: You're giving them a choice of 30 days or 120 days.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: There are two choices: A and B, 30 days or 120 days. If you're in a hurry, you have 30 days. Otherwise 120 days is the standard.

David.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, then Mr. Bittle.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, I'm fine.

Mr. Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.): Is it feasible to allow the individual the choice of having a drop-down view? Do we have to say 30 or 120 days, or could it be a drop-down and you could pick 30, 60, 90, or 120 days, but I agree with Blake that either way, there should be a deadline, and if we're saying 30 or 120 days, why not have all four options, depending on the individual.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Blake's point is it has a fixed amount of time, and I'm fine with that.

The Chair: Is that okay, Blake?

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, my key is that there needs to be a fixed time, and it can't be flexible. Once you've chosen it, you've chosen it, and I'm comfortable with whatever the choices are made.

The Chair: Okay, it looks as if the committee is recommending that as part of number two, the petitioner be able to chose from 20, 60, 90, or 120 days, but after that there is no option to extend.

Mr. Blake Richards: In giving those choices, is there any significant extra administrative burden or extra cost added? If there is, would it be significantly different if there were two choices compared to four choices, for example?

Mr. André Gagnon: It's essentially a technical question, so whether you add two or four will not make a difference. The costs associated with it would be exactly the same.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Do you foresee there being any significant extra cost or administrative burden from a choice situation?

Mr. André Gagnon: No.

Mr. Blake Richards: No. Okay.

The Chair: Good, we have the first recommendation.

I'm going to open discussion on number two, the issue of signatures.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: First, maintaining 500 signatures for electronic petitions and 25 for paper petitions is reasonable. I don't see any reason to change it.

The Chair: Anyone else?

David, do you have any comment? No.

Is the committee good with that? We'll leave it as is.

On the issue of needing five supporters for the petition to be able to go ahead, I'm surprised that 11% don't make it. I would have thought that if it were very clear up front that you needed five names, you wouldn't get any without five names.

Blake.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm just trying to make sure I understand the concern here. Obviously, I haven't been involved in trying to set up one of these, but I know there is a requirement for them to have some support, which makes sense. They must have five people. What do they do to get that support? Do they email these people and ask them to sign the petition? How does this work? If it's a requirement to have five, I get the concern about maybe their choosing five people and one of them turns out to be ineligible, but can they choose 20 or 30 people and as long as they have five send it back? How does that work exactly? I'm a little unclear about that.

● (1125)

Mr. André Gagnon: When the petitioner creates the account and identifies some supporters, they can identify up to 10 individuals. We're not that aware of how they interact with those individuals beforehand, but clearly, individuals are identified. In some cases people just identify five, and maybe one of them is not exactly as good a Facebook friend as you thought they were and will not be support the petition. That's where some difficulties arise.

Mr. Blake Richards: That could just be a situation where they don't really have five supporters and they just take a flyer on five people, but in the cases where someone has taken the maximum they are allowed and said, here are 10 people, can you give us a sense of the rate of those not being the five? In my mind, if we're giving people the ability to say there are 10 people and they're choosing not to take that, it's really their own fault.

Mr. André Gagnon: It's a good indication that things are problematic. I don't think it's a big problem—I'm just checking with Jeremy on that.

It's not a big problem when, let's say, you put 10 names there. It's usually not an issue then. It's really when you only put five and the email address of one of the five is not correct. Now you're getting into trouble.

Mr. Blake Richards: It sounds like this is really not a problem. In terms of the actual requirements themselves there's not a problem. It's people choosing not to take advantage of what's available to them that is the problem. If that's the case, that's your own mistake, not a problem with the requirements. That's what I'm seeing here, so maybe there's no need to change this.

The Chair: Mr. Saini.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Are there any criteria for these five people? Do they have to be permanent residents or citizens?

Mr. Charles Robert: It's the same as for any petition. They either have to be a resident or a Canadian citizen.

Mr. Raj Saini: So either-or.

Mr. Charles Robert: Yes.

Mr. Raj Saini: If they put the five people's names down, do you verify that? What's the verification process for the individual?

Mr. André Gagnon: It's the same verification process as for regular petitioners. We just verify that they are eligible. It's not exactly the same as the information being shared regarding the petitioner. It's a bit more for a petitioner.

Mr. Raj Saini: Okay.

The Chair: I don't like the suggestion that members would have to check all these requirements on petitions. We have enough things to do, so it's good that you're doing that, to make sure a petition is eligible.

Is it the sense of committee members to leave things the way they are?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Yes. I'm good with that.

The Chair: Okay.

We'll move to the issue of sponsors.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I agree with the idea that....

The Chair: I brought this issue up, I think. I agree with that, to change the name from "sponsor" to "presenter", because "sponsor" suggests that you're actually supporting a petition, whereas if you're just presenting it in Parliament like a paper petition you're just presenting it.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I've never heard anybody get up in the House and say, "I disagree with this petition, Mr. Speaker."

The Chair: So that's okay? People agree with changing the term "sponsor" to "presenter"?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Now we are dealing with the issue of publishing paper petitions. I understand that the two options the clerk is suggesting here are....

What do you do with paper petitions right now once the government's made its recommendation?

Mr. André Gagnon: Once the government has responded to the petition, its response is tabled in the House and is available for consultation.

Mr. Charles Robert: As a paper copy....

The Chair: I'm not sure I've noticed. Sometimes I have a hard time figuring out who is presenting the petition. Is there a person who is responsible, someone whom you tell that the answer has been tabled in the House?

Mr. André Gagnon: Clearly, the process that has been followed for e-petitions has been much easier to establish because, from the beginning, you have a sense of who, through the email addresses, has signed the petition. We have provided from the beginning an indication to those individuals, first, when the initial petition is tabled, and second, when the response to that petition is tabled by the government.

That type of information is gathered for e-petitions, but it's not the same for paper petitions.

● (1130)

The Chair: What you're proposing is that once the government responds to a paper petition or an e-petition, it goes on the electronic database, but the presenter or the person who organized the petition wouldn't even know that.

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes.

The Chair: They would have to figure it out.

Mr. André Gagnon: That's always the difficulty with paper petitions. You need the person to have either signed or started the petition; you need to follow the process in the House. By doing what is proposed here, which is essentially to put the content of a petition on the website, have it translated into both official languages, and then when that petition is being responded to by the government, have that text of the government's response, you would take it a step further in at least sharing information following the tabling of that petition in the House.

As you can imagine, trying to sort out the addresses, email addresses or postal codes of different individuals who have signed the paper petition, would take too much of an effort for the results at the end of the day. With paper petitions, it is hard to get back to the petitioners directly in the same way we are doing it for e-petitions.

At least this proposal is going a step further to share the information following the tabling of government's response, but also following the tabling of the petition in the first place.

The Chair: Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to step back a little bit. I think it was Mr. Simms, in a previous Parliament, who moved a motion regarding sessional papers being published online. I understand that the library committee met recently on this and that there have been some challenges.

Would those challenges be similar to what we face with this? Would you be able to elaborate a little bit on what those might be?

Mr. Charles Robert: I'm not really very good at this: I'm challenged by a fountain pen.

Converting a paper petition into an electronic format would be a challenging process, especially because there are so many paper petitions that are presented. You saw the stats in the paper. Normally, it's 1,500 per session. This is a large volume to deal with.

The proposal that we are suggesting is that the responses be available uniquely in electronic format. That would make a lot of the information more accessible.

The problem there is that the response of the government to a petition belongs to the Privy Council Office, not to us, so the burden falls on them to make, if they are willing, the responses to paper petitions electronically available.

Mr. John Nater: I just want to clarify, as well, that our privilege as a Parliament to publish papers would allow us to publish a scanned copy or other types of formats that may not always be in perfect condition. We have the privilege of doing so.

Mr. André Gagnon: I think what is behind your question is this: how do we make available information that is tabled in the House, either paper responses to paper petitions, other responses, or government responses to committee reports, or agencies that table a report in the House through a minister? The objective is to make this accessible and available to the largest number of people. The question then becomes, "How accessible do you make it?"

Scanned copies have been, I would say, an interim measure throughout the years, but clearly have not offered all of the benefit that is expected from documents tabled in the House. For instance, those documents need to be easily accessible to people who have difficulty accessing, reading, or hearing audio documents.

Scanned copies are clearly far away from meeting those exigencies. That's why in the discussions that we have already started with the Privy Council Office with regard to petitions—which clearly form a smaller portion of all documents tabled in the House—we have already set ourselves very high standards regarding the accessibility of the documents, because that's part of the new reality that we are working with. I think it's a commitment that the House of Commons has decided to meet.

● (1135)

Mr. John Nater: I have a different topic now.

We had our colleague Diane Finley's example earlier—I guess it was in the fall—of paper size. I think it was that ledger size paper wasn't legal.

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Nater. That's a later recommendation.

Mr. John Nater: Do we have it in there?

The Chair: Yes, it's in there.

Mr. John Nater: I will come back to that then.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Out of order.

The Chair: Out of order.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Mr. Saini.

Mr. Raj Saini: Mr. Gagnon, can you help me with the procedure here? Somebody gives you a paper petition, and there are 25 signatures on it. The 25 signatures each have an address and pertinent information for each person who signed that petition. Does somebody physically go through and check the addresses: who they are, and if they are legitimate or not?

Mr. André Gagnon: Let's say Mr. Saini signs a petition. No, not Mr. Saini because he cannot sign a petition. Well, he can sign a petition, but we won't count his name.

Let's say that people sign a petition. We won't check each of the names listed to see if that person really lives on that street or in that city mentioned. That will not be done.

What we do is a thorough check to see if all of the information that is gathered on the piece of paper seems to make sense. We don't do that for all of them. Let's say there are 2,000 signatures on the paper petition. We go through the first 25. For the petition to be certified, except for the content and all of those things, in terms of numbers it's 25. We make sure that at least 25 signed, and a bit more, are—

Mr. Raj Saini: What do you do with the e-petitions, then, that have 500 signatures?

Mr. André Gagnon: It's about the same—

Mr. Charles Robert: Process.

Mr. André Gagnon: —process for the e-petitions. That said, there are further requirements that have been identified by the committee—for instance, the IP address. Clearly, the IP address cannot be from the Government of Canada. That's an example of it. Those are easy things to do.

As you are aware, an email address is like any other address found on a paper petition.

Mr. Raj Saini: When the response is tabled by the government, how does that information get to the people who have signed a paper petition?

Mr. André Gagnon: That's why I made a reference to the e-petition. The e-petition is fairly easy because we have it in our database. It's a database in the House of Commons, not on the government website. Let's say that Mr. Christopherson tabled a petition in the House—Mr. Christopherson has no access to the information. When a response to an e-petition is tabled in the House, it's easy to refer to or inform the individual who has signed the petition. As for the paper petition, the information is published in the *Debates* and in the *Journals* of the House of Commons.

Also, let's say the member is quite active in collecting signatures or having a direct link with those who are petitioning Parliament. That member could get back to those individuals and say that this is a response the government has tabled regarding their petition.

Mr. Raj Saini: For efficiency's sake, when somebody organizes the paper petition, would it be better if that one person's name were on it who could disseminate that information to everybody else? Would that be a more efficient process?

Mr. André Gagnon: Do you mean the private citizen that would be—

Mr. Raj Saini: For paper petitions.

Mr. André Gagnon: That person could take it upon themselves to do that. That said, you can imagine that person would be gathering information on different individuals who signed the paper petition. That could raise other questions regarding the nature of the information gathered and would remove from the House of Commons the responsibility regarding protection of private information.

Mr. Charles Robert: I am understanding the question a bit differently. I'm a bit lost in what you're actually asking for.

If the government gives a response to a paper petition as a paper document, the only thing that's noted in the *Journals*, or possibly the *Debates*, is the fact that this was actually done. It becomes a sessional paper. In the old days, sessional papers were printed as companion volumes to the *Journals*, but that was at the end of the session. Unless you actually knew when a response or a sessional paper was deposited in the House, there was no easy way for you to find it or make a request for it. When it was a paper version then, you had actually had to wait until it was published. We used to publish volumes and volumes of sessional papers as part of the journals process.

If you're talking about who finds out when a response to a petition has been tabled in the House, you actually have to do a search. Then you find out that it's been done, but you don't necessarily have access to the response. You have to make a request to have access to the response.

If it's done electronically, all you have to do is to go to the petitions section on the House of Commons website and access it. The process of searching is a lot easier. The information that you want will be found, as opposed to there simply being an indication that something that you're looking for has been done, without actually providing you the information that you want. That's why going through the electronic format will provide tremendous advantages to those who are petitioners and want to know how the government is reacting to this.

● (1140)

Mr. Raj Saini: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: I want to follow up on both the electronic information and the paper petitions. We're hearing a lot lately about protection of personal information and things like that.

I'm curious as to what safeguards are in place to protect data that would have come in online, and also the hard-copy form, because there is information there as well. How many people within the House administration have access to this information? Is there anyone outside of the House administration who has access to any of this information? In the long term, what is done with the information, particularly email addresses and phone numbers? How is that disposed of when the time comes?

Mr. André Gagnon: Mr. Nater, that is a good question. It was one of the main issues in the last Parliament, when the question of e-petitions came up.

The reason is that a lot of information is gathered when you sign a petition, in the sense that there can be a lot of people signing that petition electronically. No one from outside the organization has access to the information that is gathered for the e-petition system. As a member of Parliament, you would have access to basic information from the petitioner, because if you are being asked to sponsor or present a petition, you may want to contact that person to see what that person wants to do, what their motivations are, and all of those things. That is normal, and the individual will agree that this information can be provided to the member of Parliament.

As for the rest of the information, we might identify that 74 individuals came from Nova Scotia, or from different provinces or territories, but that's the only information that is made public. As for internal matters, we have a set of procedural clerks and individuals who work directly on the petitions, but as you can imagine, they are professionals who respect all of the information protocol that we have established.

We keep that information until the electronic petition has been answered and the government response tabled in the House, because we need to send a response back to those who have petitioned Parliament. Shortly afterwards, and in a regular manner, the information is completely eliminated.

The Chair: On a paper petition, the MP and their staff have the actual petition and the names, signatures, and addresses of people who signed it.

The proposal before us is that all petitions, both paper and electronic, would now be put on the Parliament of Canada website, along with both the description of the petition—which wasn't available before on paper—and the government response. That's what you're saying would be most effective.

Mr. André Gagnon: We're already working with the Privy Council Office on this, and clearly if this committee is supportive of that idea—without having a specific time frame, because we have not been able to identify that as of now—we will pursue our discussions with the Privy Council Office to make sure that all of that information can be shared as widely as possible.

● (1145)

The Chair: Is that okay with the committee? All electronic and paper petitions, plus the responses, would be on the electronic website. That's the only way the petitioner or the presenter would have access to it.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: In public.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: It sounds like we're hearing that the PCO is pretty involved in this, and that is where challenges could be in this. Maybe we should bring them in and hear from them.

The Chair: André.

Mr. André Gagnon: The exchanges we've had so far with the Privy Council Office have been very supportive and highly positive on this one. It's really a discussion of a technical nature to make sure that whenever there is a transfer of information between the Privy Council Office and the government, that information is made accessible in the best way possible. It's all of those things, as well as the gathering of information.

As you can imagine, it's also a question of volume. A lot of paper petitions are being tabled in the House. They are usually tabled in only one language, so we need to have them translated. It's the same thing for the response. Those are the types of things we are actively looking at with the Privy Council Office.

The Chair: We could recommend it, and if there's a problem we could—

Mr. Blake Richards: I guess my suggestion would still remain, though. If some of the challenges are faced there, it might be good to hear what exactly their thoughts are.

The Chair: Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Having heard from the witnesses here, I don't know that it's worth extending the study. That's my thought on things.

The Chair: We could always call them in if there's a problem.

Mr. Blake Richards: I guess we're being asked to make a recommendation, and obviously there's some information they might have that would help us to determine whether we're making the right recommendation. I don't know why we wouldn't do that up front rather than wait and see if there's a problem. To me, why create a problem if we're not certain?

Mr. Charles Robert: We seem to have dealt with point one of the options, but is there also a decision about point two, that you would permit the government to table responses to petitions only in electronic format?

The Chair: We were just discussing that, but Mr. Richards was saying that we might want to have PCO in to see whether there are problems with that recommendation.

Mr. Charles Robert: For the Privy Council dealing with a response, I don't think there would be any problem. The only thing that really matters is processing the paper petitions; but that's as paper petitions, not as responses.

Mr. Blake Richards: My thoughts on this are that if we're talking about an option, it's one thing. If we start to say it can only be done that way, then I think it's even more necessary that we would hear from them.

If we're talking about an option, it's a different story. I still think it would be good to hear from them, but an option at least allows some flexibility.

The Chair: Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If you're permitting the government to table responses to petitions only in electronic format, you're permitting them. That's giving them an option. I don't see any problem.

Mr. Blake Richards: We're talking about two different things here. There was the option, and then the idea was raised that it would be the only way it could be done. That would be a different thing. If it's an option, it's less of a concern.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Let's keep the options open.

Mr. Charles Robert: The purpose of the presentation was to point out that the electronic format has tremendous advantages in terms of accessibility. The paper format is becoming, in comparison, a restrictive document. It is less accessible. It exists basically as a copy that's filed away, whereas having a document that's on a website is, in fact, if you like, a much more democratic kind of document in terms of its being accessible.

If the idea is to have a paper copy that is pretty well going to be a unique document unless its copied from paper to paper, I'm not sure that there's really.... It's really up to you, but it's a curiosity to wonder if it's somehow another curbing of the rights of members or the options that are available to you. Even as an electronic document, you can print it.

● (1150)

The Chair: Is there anything that would be added by bringing in the Privy Council Office?

Mr. Charles Robert: Only if co-operation broke down, but I don't see that happening.

Mr. Raj Saini: I think it's pretty clear.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Yes, it's clear.

The Chair: Is the committee basically in agreement in recommending both one and two under this section?

Mr. Blake Richards: What's two?

The Chair: Do you have the document? It says, "Permit the government to table responses...in electronic format."

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Permitting the government response.

Mr. Blake Richards: Permitting it, yes, rather than requiring.

The Chair: Okay, we'll turn to rules for paper petitions. This goes back to the point Mr. Nater was making, so I'll let him open the discussion.

Mr. John Nater: It was really just a question. What challenges would be presented if we allowed leger-sized paper or other paper, not legal or letter-sized paper?

Mr. Charles Robert: I don't think the challenge is significant, but sometimes petitions come in the form of postcards—I've seen that—and they've sometimes come in sheets. Who knows, they could even come on some sort of huge roll. I've seen one petition that a member tried to bring in with a wheelbarrow just to demonstrate how many signatures had been brought in, but I didn't really get a chance to look at what the format was. There are other things they might want to use, just to demonstrate the kind of companies or whatever that are supporting it; they could use logos, other trademarks, symbols, or anything of that sort, and the question really is that in the past that's always been forbidden. Now do you want to open it up and just simply become a little bit more relaxed about it? It would be the same with paper size.

The Chair: Let's go through each of these. There are three different items here: first of all, a) would we allow non-offensive, non-partisan images or logos to appear on the page or on the reverse of a petition?

Blake.

Mr. Blake Richards: My thinking on this is what is the need to have these things on there? Are we going to start going down a road that we don't want to go down? Then someone has to determine what's non-offensive and non-partisan. Is there really some need to have logos on a petition? I can't imagine what it is. That just creates a task that I think is.... I wouldn't want to be put in a place of having to make those decisions about what's non-partisan, what's non-offensive, when there's really no need to have it on there. If there were some reason to have a logo on there, that would be different.

The Chair: David.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I totally agree with Blake. I do not see any reason to have logos on the petitions. Logos or companies having their logos on petitions is the last thing I need to have, especially when you're putting the petitions on the Internet. No, it's not what we're here for. I think it's appropriate not to have logos and such on petitions.

The Chair: Is that the sense of the committee?

Okay, we won't allow logos.

Second, or b), is a requirement to have any address format that clearly establishes the city, town or village where the signatories reside.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: As opposed to what?

The Chair: André can confirm this, but I think sometimes people might not use the exact format that the government has.

Do you want to comment on that one, André?

Mr. André Gagnon: The idea here is essentially to ensure that whenever there is a signatory, a person who signs a paper petition, the amount of information that's needed to identify the individual is enlarged a bit to make sure that that petition can be counted amongst the 25 names. It's that simple.

The Chair: It's if someone does something slightly different from the official format but the information is still there. In the past, I think they've been rejected.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Basically what we're getting at here, is let's say someone is filling this thing out and right now you must have your town, your province, your postal code listed. Let's say they put "John Smith, 123 Jones Street, Toronto", and then they put their postal code and they forgot to put Ontario. Now you can say, that's pretty obvious where this person is and you're able to verify it, rather than say, "Well, it doesn't have Ontario, so we can't go with it."

Is that basically what we're talking about here?

● (1155)

Mr. André Gagnon: We're trying to remove technicalities. That's what we're trying to remove.

Maybe Jeremy, you have something to add.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc (Principal Clerk, Chamber Business and Parliamentary Publications): The way the requirements are written, there are certain address combinations that are allowed and others that aren't. So if you filled it out and, as you say, indicated Toronto but not the province, we know Toronto is in Ontario, but if it doesn't have the province, that's not one of the allowed combinations. So that wouldn't be counted.

Mr. Blake Richards: It really just makes it easier for people who maybe forget to put in one little part of it in. You still have to be comfortable that you can verify it, but that's really what we're trying to do, just to make it easier for people.

The Chair: Just for the minutes, that was Jeremy LeBlanc from the Clerk's office.

Mr. Blake Richards: That makes sense.

The Chair: Are people okay with that?

Now we're on c), the use of varying paper sizes.

Do one of the clerks want to comment on that? What's practicable and what's not?

Mr. André Gagnon: I think Ms. Finley essentially brought that to our attention in a very direct way, in the sense of when you have individuals who are signing a petition that is exactly of the same type as the petition on an 8 x 11 piece of paper, but is in a different format. For different reasons—and I think Ms. Finley had good reasons for that—many people want to have more space to sign, bigger letters on the piece of paper. This is essentially to accommodate those types of situations.

The Chair: So is the wording in c) okay?

Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I was just going to suggest that you have a limit on the size of the paper so that you won't have a 400 foot scroll come in. Call it something like anything that could reasonably scanned. That would be the standard I'd recommend. If you can reasonably scan it, it's fine. I don't care if it's A4 or letter size. If you can scan it, it's fine.

Personally, I don't have a problem with postcards being accepted. I don't know what my colleagues think. We get a lot of postcards, why can't they be counted as petitions? If you get 25 postcards with the same message and same signature, what difference does it make if it's one or ten on a page. That's my thought on that.

Mr. André Gagnon: The postcards, most of the time, are written in different formats, so even the content, the text that would be there, could not be counted as a petition. That has been the case in the past.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That disqualifies them for other reasons, but if it's in the correct format and it calls on the House to do something without a logo and it's one signature per page, I don't have a problem with that. That's all I'm saying.

Mr. André Gagnon: Okay.

Mr. Charles Robert: If it's without a logo, that might be a catch.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's up to them.

Mr. André Gagnon: That's up to the committee to decide.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Are there any other thoughts?

The Chair: Mr. Nater, you're shaking your head.

Mr. John Nater: Yes, I'm shaking it both ways. I'm on the fence on that one. If there's a postcard with one name per page, all of a sudden it could be the wheelbarrow situation, where you're bringing in a stack, and it is becoming a bit of a stunt type of thing. We don't necessarily want to go down that route.

I think especially when it's presented as being in an accessible format, in a larger size with a larger font, which was Ms. Finley's argument.... I think the wording in here—"usual size" or something like that—allows for flexibility and perhaps some encouragement in terms of the larger size. Personally—and again there could be other input—I just wonder if the postcard format would get us into a stunt type of scenario.

The Chair: So if someone had a paper postcard and they had a thousand postcards, the member would have to present that pile when they presented the petition in the House, right?

Blake.

Mr. Blake Richards: The point about the images that was raised by the Clerk, I think, is an important one. How many postcards don't have some kind of logo or image on them? It's not like they go out as just a plain piece of paper. That's not too likely to happen. So I think it is actually an important point. I'm also a little bit torn on the idea, but I think you're going to run into the problem anyway with the images and the logos and stuff like that. It may be better just to avoid that problem by just not having it.

The Chair: You mean not having postcards?

Mr. Blake Richards: Exactly. I'm torn, but that, to me, is probably where you'd end up having a problem anyway.

● (1200)

The Chair: So the committee seems a little ambivalent on postcards?

You're voting for it?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Ambivalent is a good word for it.

The Chair: Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: It's just a question of clarity. Typically postcards are made of a bit thicker paper. When we're determining usual size, would that preclude the card stock format type of thing from being used, rather than the regular petition paper that we are using now?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: The requirement usually has to do with the size rather than the format of paper. I think if someone had an 8 1/2 by 11 sheet of cardstock, that would still be acceptable.

Mr. John Nater: It would be? Okay.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is there a limit to the thickness you'll accept? What if somebody shows up with an 8 1/2 by 11 brick of wood attached to a tub? What would happen?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: What would happen?

Mr. John Nater: It's still paper.

The Chair: What's the decision on postcards?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: There's no consensus to keep them, so don't make them.

The Chair: There's no consensus, so we won't allow them? At least we could. Okay.

On part c), we just have to qualify the varying sizes of paper a bit. And you suggested they be scannable?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: They should be reasonably scannable. If you can put them in a machine that can scan them all, and that's fine. If you have to get a special piece of equipment because it's 74 by 16, then it's probably not so useful.

Mr. André Gagnon: I'm just worried that maybe there is somewhere somehow a major giant scanner that we could refer to.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's what the "reasonable" part is for.

Mr. Charles Robert: We could come back to you and actually give you a more specific proposal about what the maximum size would be, if that would be helpful.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If you could give us minimum and maximum sizes and we could be done with that, I wouldn't mind. But if somebody shows up with something that is A4, don't reject it. It's not that different, right?

The Chair: Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I agree with what the Clerk just said. I think there needs to be a minimum and a maximum size, because if the issue is to say that something is reasonably scannable, then the person who is now creating the petition won't know until they've submitted it whether it's acceptable or not. They need some indication as to minimum and maximum sizes, and if they know those, then they can ensure they comply with them.

Is that something you can come back to us on to say "Here are a minimum and a maximum we feel comfortable with" and then we can decide whether that's...?

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): I assume that, as a practical matter, scannable is going to mean it can be fed into a document scanner automatically once the staples are taken out. So I'm going to assume that means in practice 8 1/2 by 11 or 8 1/2 by 14 and nothing else. Maybe we can take metric sizes like A4. I don't know how likely it is that we're going to get those. You'd have to buy your paper overseas. It seems to me that having just those two sizes would be the simplest thing, and that's going to include most....

Mr. André Gagnon: If I remember well, Ms. Finley, if we can take that example...I think it was 11 by 17 inches.

Mr. Scott Reid: Can you scan 11 by 17?

Mr. André Gagnon: It goes into a photocopier, so I suspect that it can be scanned.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, that would be reasonable, in that case.

The Chair: Why don't we leave it. I see that you all approve.

The clerk will present that and put it into the recommendation to the researcher, for a maximum and a minimum.

We also have these seven recommendations from Project Naval Distinction.

Does everyone have this document?

It's an organization called Project Naval Distinction. The clerk sent you all a copy of those recommendations.

The first one was—the problem they're raising is that if the member doesn't present it, then it could be a problem for the petitioners. A member could be obstructionist or disorganized, then just not present it. They're suggesting that there should be a timeline and if the member doesn't present it by that time, then it should be opened up for another member to choose to present it.

Go ahead, Mr. Graham.

● (1205)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: When you create an electronic petition, a member has to have sponsored it from the get-go, right? At that point, they're making an implicit commitment to present it.

How often does it happen that a petition has come through, but then nobody wanted to present it? Do we have an idea?

Mr. André Gagnon: Is that for an e-petition?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Yes.

Mr. André Gagnon: Really, it's not that often.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: From the statistics we have, there are about 60 petitions that have been certified and not yet presented. Maybe they were just certified last week—

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Out of how many?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: That would be out of over 250 that have been certified.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If that is since the start of this Parliament, then it's a quarter.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: As to how many of them were certified a couple of weeks ago versus those certified months and months ago, I couldn't tell you.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I suppose I'll have to check with the clerk of petitions.

The Chair: If a member has signed up to be the presenter, but then doesn't present it, do the petitioners have any option? Can they get another presenter?

Mr. André Gagnon: No.

The Chair: No.

Yes, Blake.

Mr. Blake Richards: I can understand where a petitioner might have a frustration, if a member has signed up to be a sponsor—now we're going to call them a "presenter", I guess—and they don't present these things. I can see where the frustration would be for a petitioner, but I guess it would be incumbent upon them to maybe have a discussion with that member of Parliament and ask, "Are you comfortable with this and are you going to be able to present it in a timely fashion?"

I think that when you start getting into requiring a member.... What if they're travelling with a committee for three weeks or something?

How would we actually enforce it anyway? Are we going to kick a member out of the House because they didn't present a petition?

I think it's a little unworkable.

Perhaps it's incumbent upon the person who's creating a petition to have a good discussion with that MP and make sure that they're going to present it for them, before they ask them to be a presenter.

The Chair: If they don't, should there be an option for that petitioner to go and get another presenter?

Go ahead, Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'd be inclined to think so.

Let's say that our late colleague Gord Brown had been on the verge of presenting a petition and was suddenly unable to because he passed away. I'm not sure what happens in a situation like that. It seems reasonable that someone else should be able to pick up the slack, in that particular situation.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have no problem with the petition being transferrable, but I do have a big problem with any system that requires a member to speak in the House at any time or do something in the House that is against the independence of the member.

The Chair: So, Clerk, I don't think there is any appetite to force a person to present it, but do you see an option for allowing someone else to present it? Is that a possibility?

Mr. André Gagnon: This happens regularly in the House in the sense that paper petitions are sometimes provided to one member of Parliament. That member even has it certified, and it is given back to the member of Parliament. Then it's another member who presents the petition in the House. You can anticipate that could also happen in regard to e-petitions.

The Chair: I thought you just said that wasn't allowed.

Mr. André Gagnon: No, it's not allowed electronically in the system to change...because of the rules that you have. But you can be a sponsor, and afterwards, another member can table the petition.

The Chair: Blake.

Mr. Blake Richards: Maybe my question is now irrelevant. It sounds to me as if this isn't an issue. In terms of the scenario that Mr. Reid raised here, in the situation where someone ceases to be a member for whatever reason, is there not a way already to have the petition—

Mr. André Gagnon: The petition has been certified and can be presented by someone else.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, so it sounds as if we don't have an issue here.

The Chair: Okay, there is no issue there.

The second one, that it requires a sponsor only once the petition has been certified....

Mr. André Gagnon: I think it's been taken care of by the discussion you just had.

The Chair: Okay.

So, the third is to change the electronic interface page to allow a bulleted list of two.... I don't even know what this one is about. Does anyone understand this one? It is to change the electronic interface of the petition submission page to allow a bulleted list under the "To" section, similar to what is in place for the "Whereas" section.

● (1210)

Mr. Scott Reid: You know how it goes. You might say "Whereas poverty is widespread in Canada; whereas children are frequently....", and you just drop the bullets off and then say "Therefore, we call on the Government of Canada to enact remedial measures to work with the provinces" and so on. I think that's the point they are getting at.

Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.): It's flexibility in formatting. That's all.

Mr. Charles Robert: Well, the other guess is that it is going to different agencies, for example, to the House of Commons, to the Senate, to the Department of Foreign Affairs, to a minister, as opposed to the sensible suggestion you came up with.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm not sure, actually. You're saying it would call upon the Minister of Agriculture to do this, the Minister of Finance to do that. Is that what you mean?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: When you fill out the form for an electronic petition, you choose to whom the petition is addressed, to the House of Commons or a minister or a department.

Mr. Scott Reid: Oh, right.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: But you're able to make one choice only. I think what the folks here are suggesting is that you be able to address your petition to more than one of the choices, as opposed to specific recommendations to more than one.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay, I've got it.

The Chair: Right now, can you do that, make it that someone do this and do that? Can you do more than one thing?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: In the form that you fill out for an electronic petition, you are able to choose only one person to whom you address it.

The Chair: I meant the different actions. Can you ask more than one action, as Mr. Reid was suggesting? You can already?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: Yes. In terms of the relief sought, if you will, you can have multiple reliefs.

Mr. Blake Richards: You just answered my question, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Blake Richards: That was my question exactly. I was pretty certain you could already ask for more than one thing to be done.

The Chair: Okay. Do people want them to be able to address it to more than one organization or not? That's what these people are suggesting.

Mr. Charles Robert: In terms of dealing with petitions, the House of Commons has control only through the Standing Orders to oblige the government to prepare a response. If it goes to a government department and it doesn't go to the House of Common, well clearly, it's not for you. But if it goes to another department as well as to you, the department may or may not care. And because it does do that, it doesn't give you, as the House, some additional responsibility or obligation, nor does it impose anything on the government. The government's obligation to respond to a petition is due only to the fact that under the Standing Orders, there is a requirement to do it when it goes to the House of Commons. If it goes anywhere else....

I think what we see here is perhaps a misunderstanding of the process on the part of this applicant.

The Chair: Okay, so this isn't necessary.

Mr. Charles Robert: I don't think so.

The Chair: Okay, agreed.

Fourth is to create a portal for members through which they can view petitions, sorted with subject words, and reach out to the petition drafter should they wish to offer a person...one that doesn't have a sponsor. But so far, the rules are that they have to have a sponsor. And they're going to be relatively accessible under this new system, right, where they're all on electronically? So this probably isn't necessary.

Mr. André Gagnon: I'm not exactly sure I understand the recommendation to start with. Essentially, what I see here is that members of Parliament could choose individuals who would like to present petitions. I think it goes along the lines of the discussion that is initiated by proposal number 1, which is that maybe this group was in a situation where their petition was not presented as rapidly as they thought from the first part. Essentially what they are proposing here is a mechanism by which members of Parliament who are very keen on presenting a petition on subject A would be able to get to petitioners and say, "I'm really looking forward to tabling such a petition. Can I be your sponsor?" It's changing the nature of the relationship, really.

The Chair: Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: As I read this, I have a different reading of it. If you notice the part in brackets, it says, "one which does not have a sponsor at that time". In order for it to be up, it has to have a sponsor.

Mr. André Gagnon: Exactly.

Mr. Blake Richards: I think they're talking about here where they haven't been able to find an MP sponsor, and they don't want to go through the effort of trying to track one down, so they're hoping an MP is going to go and find them. I think that's what this is about.

Mr. André Gagnon: That's exactly right.

● (1215)

Mr. Blake Richards: I think that's probably a little bit of an unrealistic hope. As much as I understand why they would want to do it, I mean, go do your legwork, right?

The Chair: Okay. Is the committee in agreement with that?

Number 5 is to better highlight privacy protections. Is that highlighted up front when people are doing petitions?

Mr. André Gagnon: That information is shared. The guarantees are indicated on the website, and we are, in fact, very proud of what we are doing.

The Chair: Are they on the form?

Mr. André Gagnon: If the person has the sense that it was not highlighted enough, we can take a look at the website again and ask, "How can we make it even clearer for those who are signing a petition, starting a petition, or supporting a petition to make sure that they are fully aware of the guarantees that we're offering regarding privacy of information?"

The Chair: When they go in electronically, if I ask to my friend to sign this petition, they go into the House of Commons electronically, they find a petition, and they go to sign, do they see right there that their information is protected?

Mr. André Gagnon: The information is readily accessible, yes.

The Chair: Without them searching all around?

Mr. André Gagnon: I'm not sure of the level of detail that's provided there.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: In the various guides that are available on the website, there is a section that deals with data management and explains the privacy protections that exist. It's part of the guide. I think it's probably also part of the terms and conditions that people affirm that they have read before signing. Of course, everyone reads the terms and conditions before checking that box.

The Chair: Can we just leave this as a friendly suggestion to make sure that, up front, confidentiality is evident?

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: You essentially addressed my question, but I think I'll do a follow-up on it. In order to do more than what we have now, in order to comply with this and do more, the stuff they'll certainly read before they agree, what could you imagine that looking like, and what kind of expense would there be in doing that? If someone already has the ability to know this information, what do we do to make it more evident? There's got to be some cost to that, I would assume.

Mr. André Gagnon: I think that's indicated in here, and again, I'm maybe not sure of understanding the proposal, but essentially what is indicated here is making sure that everyone is aware that their privacy is protected. Maybe our messaging is not exactly as it should be in terms of informing individuals that we are very strict on preserving privacy information. That is maybe what we're alluding to here.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm feeling like we already do it, but what you're saying is maybe you think we could change some of the language so people understand it better.

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, well, if it's as simple as that, I have no issue with that.

The Chair: Okay, we are on number 6. This is a fairly major potential change:

> Consider creating thresholds, similar to the e-petition system in the United Kingdom, whereby e-petitions which receive large amounts of signatures are entitled to a debate in the House of Commons.

I think it's what, half a million or something in the United Kingdom? Then there's a mandatory debate in the House of Commons.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: It's 100,000.

The Chair: So it would be something like a take-note debate, for instance.

Mr. Charles Robert: Presumably, but again, that's a decision that's entirely yours.

The Chair: Mr. Bittle and then Mr. Graham.

Mr. Chris Bittle: I think this process has a significant potential to be hijacked by groups with the money to do so, and I think it could potentially become a ridiculous process. I don't support that.

The Chair: Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If there is public interest in a particular debate, we already have methods to do that through emergency debates and take-note debates, so I don't think it's necessary to put it in this system. If the House leaders want to get together and create a debate, that can happen already.

The Chair: So everyone is opposed so far. The committee is opposed

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The last one is number seven:

> Allow petition drafters to suggest or select from a list of subject keywords...that will be applied to their petition, rather than having them assigned, as they are a key feature for attracting unsolicited signatures.

Mr. Gagnon, do you have a comment on this?

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes.

All of the titles that are given to petitions are done by professionals, who identify the content but also make sure that the way this content is identified is also identified in a similar fashion in the Debates of the House, in the committee proceedings. Also, when the responses to petitions are tabled, they are using that title.

For research purposes, or for individuals who are interested in the subject matter, it is much easier to find that information. Also, as you can imagine, the idea is to make sure that the titles that are used are not highly partisan in the way they are presented. What we're talking about here is a public petition, and clearly you want to stay away from highly partisan words or controversial words.

● (1220)

Mr. Charles Robert: To build on what André just said, I think there is a question here of losing control over an element of our own website. I'm not sure that there is a particular advantage in letting the drafters of a petition select the key words that somehow we might be obliged to assign to our website so that people can search using that terminology.

The Chair: Under the system we just approved, where paper petitions and electronic petitions will be online, if someone put in the word "softwood lumber", would they get all the paper and electronic petitions? Would they be able to search that way?

Mr. André Gagnon: I'm not sure I can go into the details. The answer to that is yes, but usually what is identified is not only the general topic, but other data that is associated with that word. That's the usefulness and the preciseness of the system that has been put in place, so you can do research that can guide you to the information you are looking for.

As you can imagine, if individuals would want to identify the precise name of the petition, you could lose some of those elements.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: I did two things in preparation for this intervention.

One was that I considered the situation we face in my own experience, with my family's business, in designing a website and trying to steer people in certain directions. You have people going to our website and trying to find out about women's summer blouses. They have a colour range, age range, and size range that they're interested in, and it's an inherently difficult task to not either flood them with every blouse, or alternatively make it too narrow. If it's too narrow it leaves out.... It is not an easy task. I'll just observe that first.

We aren't the only ones who struggle with this; everybody who is marketing online has this problem. I wouldn't want to give the Clerk's staff the challenge of figuring out something that people who have lots of money and a strong financial incentive haven't yet been able to figure out. That's one thought.

The second thing I did was that I went to my own petitions. There are two that I've sponsored, E-48 and E-1457, and I looked up the key words. I think I'm right that these are the key words that would trigger my finding one of these two petitions. There are six key words. One of these was on having a referendum prior to any change in the electoral system, and the second one was on a national day of solidarity for victims of anti-religious bigotry and violence.

It looks to me that what you have as the key words are, number one, "electoral reform"; number two, "M-153", which is a reference to a motion, and that is referenced in any petition; number three is "national day of solidarity for victims of anti-religious bigotry and violence", which is effectively the header of that motion; number four is "referenda"; number five is "religious discrimination"; and number six is "victims".

In each case, it's these key words, and then it says "results one". I assume that means that if I type in any of these things, I'd be led only to this particular petition.

Is that correct?

Mr. André Gagnon: I think that's the case.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: It could also be any other petition that has those. You may have multiple petitions and different results, one for each of these, but I assume only one petition has these.

Mr. Scott Reid: In this case, it says one result for each of them. Can I assume only one petition has these?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: If you click on the keyword and it only brings back one petition, it's the only one that has that keyword.

Mr. Scott Reid: The obvious way of building a fuller set of keywords is to retain each keyword, or sometimes a key phrase in practice, and then as new related petitions come along over time, as much as possible, try to stick with the existing keywords as a way of developing a universe of keywords that grows organically. I think that would be the best way of doing it.

My petition on the day of solidarity is going to expire in about a week and it hasn't set off an avalanche of responses, to put it mildly. It could be that in the future someone else will come along with a petition worded somewhat differently. It would be reasonable for a user who's thinking of signing up to look at that petition to find out if there was a previous one that was worded somewhat differently. It would lead to a more informed user prior to their attaching their signature to something. Just as a suggestion, if you could retain that universe and use it for future tags on petitions, I think that would be helpful.

● (1225)

Mr. Charles Robert: I think that's one of the reasons we prefer to work with professional indexers, people who understand the nature of the work. Building a network of phrases that alludes to a similar topic allows for a more profitable search than just using such a specific, tight terminology that if you don't actually use it, you can't find it. It's the same sort of thing as if I spell "co-operate", "co-op" or "coop"; I can find some, but I won't find all.

I think that's what André was pointing to. We have indexers who are basically trying to unify the approach taken to all of the parliamentary documents we produce to make sure that outsiders or insiders who want to access specific information end up with the best results.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right.

As a continuation on that, one of these called for a referendum prior to changing the electoral system. If someone types in "referenda", I'm assuming what should happen is that the plural or the singular leads to the same thought.

Mr. Charles Robert: Yes, if you wanted to use "plebiscite", it should be findable too.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right, okay.

The Chair: You are saying we already have professionals indexing—

Mr. Charles Robert: There is a service that does that work for us.

The Chair: So if any new petition comes in, they would have the keywords and stuff, professionally, as opposed to letting someone else hijack the system and pick their own keywords.

So we should stay with that, Mr. Graham?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Yes, I was going to say that I think the clerk's office is sufficiently empowered to take care of this, that no recommendation is needed, and that I think we can put this one to bed.

The Chair: I think that's all of the recommendations. We've made about half a dozen of them, and I would recommend that the clerk, for our report, just list those recommendations, clear them with the witnesses, and then bring them back to the committee. It shouldn't take us 10 minutes to make sure of what we said, and we'll then present this report to the House and the electronic petition system would become official.

Is that okay with committee members?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Witnesses, thank you very much. This is great work, and we will suspend and go into camera for committee business on the use of indigenous languages in the House.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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